SPORN-O

An animation newsletter from Michael Sporn Animation Inc.

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EXPOSE!

"Saturday morning cartoons have warped me for life."

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1992

EDITORIAL

by Michael Sporn

Things happen at lightning speed in the 90's. Just when a newsletter gets printed, things change radically. This is true of the Presidential race: today Clinton leads Bush by 10 percentage points, tomorrow Bush is neck and neck with Clinton. In animation, it's still the big guns that are making the most noise.

Features come and go. **Pinocchio** didn't overwhelm in this past summer's reissue. Perhaps enough people still had their video copies. Watching it for free, is easier than trekking to the theatre with the kids at $7.00 apiece. **Cool World** stayed in New York just a bit longer than a week. **Bebe's Kids** opened as a matinee item and stayed there. **Little Nemo** is doing the same today. **Freddy As FRO7** will follow suit. **Rock-a-doodle** bombed in the theatres, but is doing sensationally well in video; perhaps the same will be true of **Ferngully** which is released this week. Stephen Holden, in reviewing **Freddy**, suggests that animators learn that simple oftentimes makes the best story. I'd go further, by saying that *stories* generally make the best stories. Animated films today are almost impossible to watch. The stories just do not exist. The characters move fluidly, but who cares when you aren't interested in the characters! (**Bullwinkle** had virtually no production values, but still remains as one of the classics in animation, because of the great scripts.) Maybe some of these producers will put a little more effort into the writing before they spend the megabucks on the computer-assisted animation! It's comforting to see that Andrew Lloyd Webber had held up production of the animated version of **Cats** (Spiel-berg producing) for the very reason that he feels they haven't properly developed the story. A lot of people were let go from Amblimation when word came down, and there was a lot of hostility, but Webber is right! If only there were more like him, maybe there'd be fewer films, but they'd stay in the theatres longer.

In other news, Don Bluth's studio laid off 400 in Ireland and 100 in Los Angeles. This was immediately followed by their request for bankruptcy protection in Ireland. They have

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If you have a letter or an article for Sporn-O-Graphics, please send to Denise Gonzalez at the address below. Submissions should be typed or word processed and are subject to editing.

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FEATURE

Cartoon Babes, Chicks and Gals

by Laura Goldberg

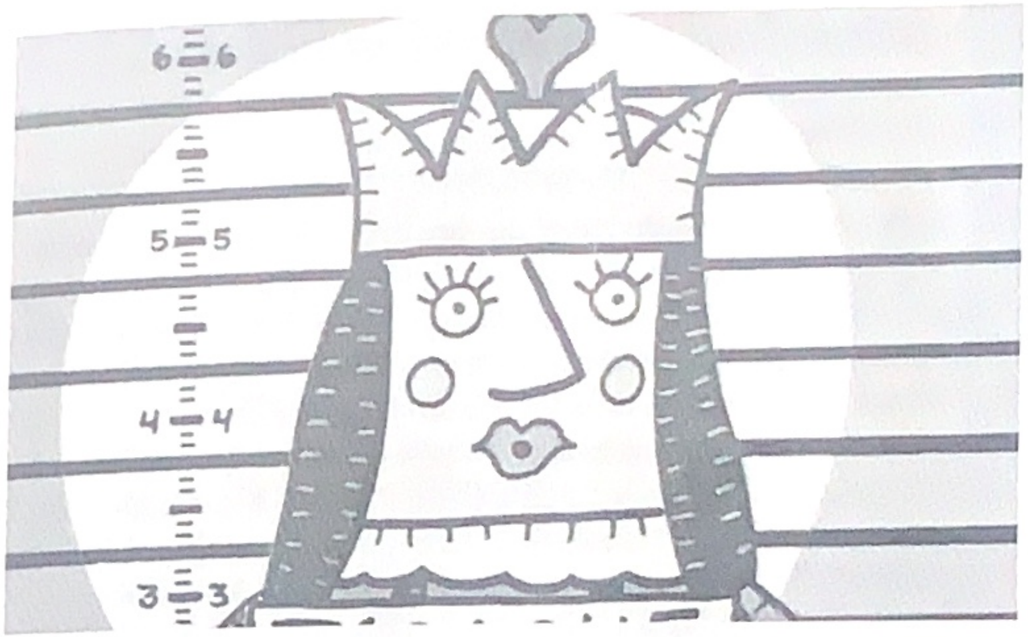
Saturday morning cartoons have warped me for life. I'm certain, in fact, that my entire generation has been irreversibly harmed. The effects on our feminist ideals are obvious. We, the children of the seventies, grew up with the likes of Wilma Flintstone and Judy Jetson. Not exactly paragons of the Women's Movement. Let's face it though, even in her bunny suit, Gloria Steinem had nothing on Wonder Woman's cast-iron boobs.

The male producers of these popular animated series seemed to have had a very specific formula for the creation of their female characters. Most of the females in these cartoons fit into one of four categories:

1. "The Ideal" - This woman is pretty, but not beautiful. She is bright, but not brainy. She is sweet, and never sassy. More importantly, she always has a boyfriend to depend upon in a moment of crisis.
2. "The Bimbo" - Beautiful, sweet and stupid. (Nuff said!)
3. "The Bitch" - Might be lovely to look at and clever as well, but she is constantly in competition with those "Ideal" ladies — and losing.
4. "The Enigma" - Brainy and independent with a pleasing personality. Finally, the perfect role model! What's the catch? In this case, she is undateable.

"Enigma" women are still a sore point with me. For example, Velma of **Scooby-Doo**. She had to pay the price for her intelligence and wit in the form of wearing thick glasses, being dumpy and having a bad haircut. Cartoons can be cruel. Daphne may not have been too bright, but she sure looked good — plus she got hunky Fred to boot!

The worst offender of "The Enigma Syndrome," however, had to be **Josie And The Pussycats**. Val was an "Enigma" gal, if ever there was. She was intelligent and gorgeous, but Val still had one tragic flaw — she was black. How this made her undateable, I'll never know. Unfortunately, there was never a black male character on the series. (And we know that the censors couldn't have possibly handled an interracial romance.) Even when the gang blasted off into outerspace,



Val was still deemed an untouchable. It was okay for Melody to date an alien species — but Val was off limits. Can someone explain the logic to me?

One of the most demoralizing aspects of Saturday mornings, however, came in the form of my favorite program, **The Superfriends**. In terms of female role models, the show only provided two, one good and one evil — respectively Wonder Woman and Catwoman. Although both women were of "super" status, they never took the lead in adventures. More often than not, Catwoman would be seen in the background, cheering on the Joker's evil plot. Wonder Woman could usually be found, invisible plane and all, in the clutches of a nasty villain, needing to be saved by her male cohorts. It was all very disheartening for a little girl who wanted a superheroine to believe in.

I do have a theory behind the lack of initiative belonging to these women. Since both ladies ere drawn with incredibly skinny waists and incredibly enormous chests, wouldn't they have found physical movement to be nearly impossible? Poor things, it must have taken all their super-strength in the morning just to squeeze into their skimpy little outfits.

So what was a young girl growing up in the seventies to do? How could one enjoy the frivolities of youth, while still being true to feminist values? Saturday morning role models were no where to be found. Where could I and the rest of my generation turn?

Thank God for Barbie. ■

Interview with Maxine Fisher

By Denise Gonzalez

Maxine Fisher's career has taken a wide turn since its start. She received her PhD. in Cultural Anthropology from the City University of New York. She altered her specialty from Indians in the New York area to folklore and tales and has been an integral part of Michael Sporn Animation, Inc. as principal script writer since the studio's beginning. Her script for **THE DANCING FROG** won an ACE Award as the Best Cable Animated Special, and her script for **ABEL'S ISLAND** was nominated for an Emmy. Her books include: **Walt Disney, Recent Revolutions in Anthropology, Women in the Third World** and **The Indians of New York City**.

Q: What was your first collaboration with Michael Sporn?

A: The first film Mike and I worked on together, "Byron B. Blackbear and the Scientific Method," was also my first experience writing for film. This was a fifteen-minute film commissioned in 1980 by The Learning Corporation of America. The inspiration was an illustrated children's book which was, to my mind, rather anti-intellectual. It may have been meant solely as an entertainment, but the message was that scientist went around bothering poor animals and making them justifiably disgruntled. The joke of the book was that the bear outsmarted the scientist by putting the expensive equipment they had hooked him up with to other uses, thereby invalidating the results of their study.

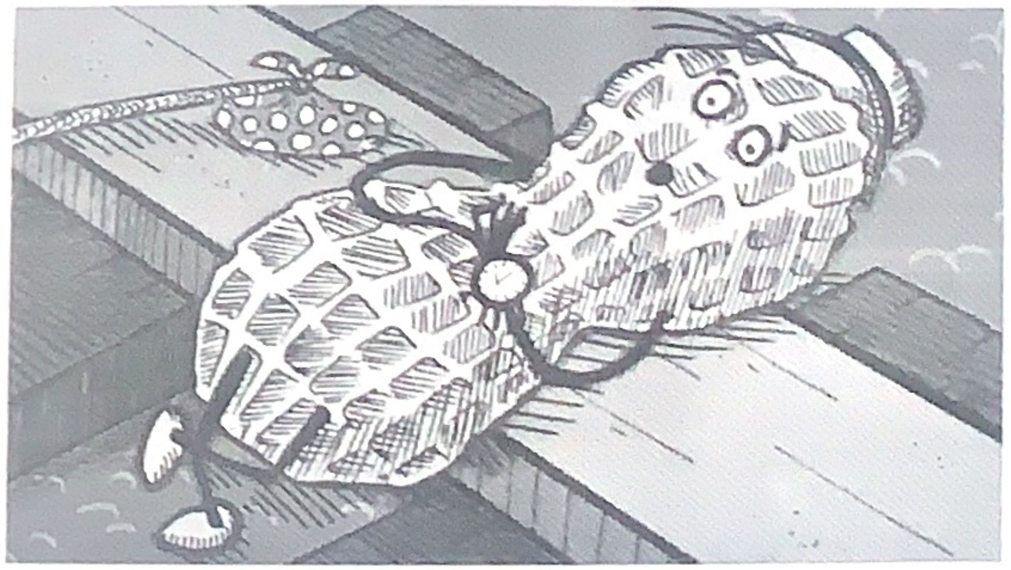
The client wanted to use the artwork of the book but somehow turn around its message so that the film became an explanation of the scientific method. I did a lot of research on the behavior of bears in the wold and came up with a story that is closely based on a study on bears in Yellowstone National Park. I still find "Byron" an endearing film. I think we managed to teach a lot in it while still being entertaining.

At about the same time, we began to get work from **SESAME STREET**. I was given a curriculum and could choose from a number different educational messages that were being emphasized that

season and write a one-minute film about a particular subject. Michael and I both liked the idea of doing these as mini-musicals. And that was how I got started writing the lyrics of songs that tell stories. The first one we did, "Crocodile Smile," has a crocodile visiting a dentist singing in an operatic voice about the importance of good dental care and it is still one of my favorites.

Q: Which do you find more challenging, writing an original script like "Jazztime" or adapting a well-known story like "The Red Shoes" or "The Little Match Girl?"

A. I don't think the challenges are necessarily greater in one case or the other; they are only different. In the case of an original story, the challenge is to invent an interesting plot and entertaining characters that will convey your message. In short, you have to invent everything. But I also invent a lot when I'm adapting. It's true that you have a skeleton of the story, or at the very least a guiding image. So the challenge here is to find a meaning in the story that you are comfortable with, that you want to impart to a contemporary audience — in our case, a young audience. I think that any tale that has lasted a long time is probably telling more that a single story, or to put it another way, has more than one message. Not all of them, however, have equal relevance today. Perhaps not even the main one. Finding the right one may require careful analysis of the original material.



Talking Eggs

THE RED SHOES, which was the most challenging of the scripts I've written, is a good example of what I mean. For example, many people who know the title "The Red Shoes" probable haven't read the original story recently. Briefly, a poor little country girl gets orphaned in the first paragraph, is immediately adopted by a wealthy stranger, grows up in luxury as a spoiled child in the city, forgets her former friends, and one day clamors for a pair of fancy red dance shoes which she finally gets, wears them to church, and is magically punished for this act when the shoes force her to dance endlessly. It's fun at first, then becomes a nightmare. Finally, she goes to the executioner and begs him to chop off her legs, which he does. Only then does she stop dancing. In the end she dies. HBO chose this title for a children's film, and when I first read it I didn't know what we could possible do with it. But that's the challenge, finding within a story the seeds of something that could be inspiring, funny, beautiful, relevant …

Q: The female characters that you and Michael create are usually very strong women. In animated film, how has the role of women changed over the years, if at all?

A: One of the greatest challenges to the film writer as well as to the writer of short stories or novels is the developing of interesting characters. I try to make the female characters in our films strong ones, partly because it seems to me that animated films suffer from a lack of good role models for girls. In recent years women have begun to be portrayed differently in live action films but you don't see the changes brought about by the women's movement of the 70's reflected much in animated films, at least not in the commercially successful ones. In fact, I'd say that things haven't changed very much since the early days of animation. We have the vamp starting with Betty Boop (who interestingly began her career as a dog!) and most recently incarnated in a different style in Holli Would of **COOL WORLD**. And then there are all those female characters who are not sexually precocious, but who are subject to all the constraints placed on them by a highly sexist society.

I know the Disney people tried to consciously create a more politically correct heroine in their version of **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST** by making Belle a bibliophile. But then she was made to seem downright queer — almost an outcast — for liking books and for preferring a life of adventure to marriage with a local macho bully. This is emphasized by the trio of interchangeable vamps who offer us the town's view of Belle. These three, who provide the only alternative model of young womanhood in the film, are of the dumb blonde variety with an added dash of nastiness thrown in. So in the end, I think Disney lost the points they racked up by trying to make Belle something different. The third type of female in the film is the one that fits most squarely into the old mold: the teapot, Mrs. Potts. She is the nurturing, all-supportive mother to Belle, to Chip, to us in the audience, and without whom we would not be in Disneyland.

The Disney tradition, which is the animation I grew up with, has always been obsessed with the mother figure. The conflict between good mothering and its opposite — i.e., a female character who does not accept the role of nurturing children as her life's work and most often takes the form of a witch or a wicked stepmother — is a recurring leitmotif in almost all the classic animated Disney features. And this is true whether the protagonists are human mothers — or mother substitutes — or animals (such as in **DUMBO** and **101 DALMATIONS**.) Think about all the "good mother" figures that dominate the films. There's Snow White mothering the Dwarfs; the Blue Fairy mothering Pinocchio; Wendy playing mother (and singing about it too!) to the crew in Never-never Land; Mrs. Jumbo in **DUMBO;** the good fairy mothering Cinderella; the three elderly fairies doing the same for Sleeping Beauty; Perdita in **101 DALMATIONS**. The heroines in these films — Snow White, Wendy, Cinderella, and Rose, and now Belle — are good girls heading for a life of marriage and motherhood themselves. Sometimes they are thwarted in this by the evil deeds of an anti-mother female figure: a witch or stepmother. What does all this offer as models for girls watching the films? Not a great deal of variety of choice, I'm afraid. Seeing a movie is so much like having a dream that the medium almost begs filmmakers to express their wishes as well as reality. What I wish for girls watching our films is the chance to be as brave and creative, assertive and self-expressive as the boys who are watching. ■

Interview with Joshua Katz Vice President of Marketing The Cartoon Network

by Denise Gonzalez

Q: What was the reasoning behind the creation of a network devoted solely to animation?

A: There's two answers to that. One, the toons deserve a home and we decided to give it to them. I think that's the fun way of looking at it. The reality of it is, the cartoons perform extremely well on cable and we felt that there was a glaring need for 24 hours of cartoon programming and 24 hours of guaranteed family programming that was friendly for the whole family.

Q: Other than the obvious, being a 24-hour cartoon network, what will place your programming above that of other networks?

A: We have the best characters consistently across the board. Show me somebody else who can say they're going to show Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, The Jetsons, The Flintstones, Yogi Bear, Top Cat, Droopy Dog, Popeye ... and the list goes on and on of extremely well known and beloved characters. That's going to make up the vast majority of our day. You might see a Sea Lab 2020 but the vast majority of our day is going to be nothing but prime cartoon characters and we can guarantee that because we have such a huge library of cartoons. That's one reason. The other is we are cartoons. We are devoted solely to cartoons. We understand cartoons better than anyone else. We have a love for the cartoon.

What we are going to have are interesting programs that have been thoughtfully combined. Animation that is designed to work together so that you won't see an MGM theatrical from 1943 next to a 1980 Hanna Barbera cartoon. These are going to be well thought out. We package shows with very 1990's themes to them. One of our programs is called Down With Droopy D. which is using Droopy at the opens and closes, the very first and last 20 or 30 seconds of every show. It's going to put Droopy in a rap environment. Droopy is the perfect rap character for the 1990's.

continued on page 14

COMING ATTRACTIONS

On HBO:

October
THE TALES OF PETER RABBIT
DIG

November
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
*IRA SLEEPS OVER **
*MARZIPAN PIG **
GAY PURR-EE

December
TWELFTH NIGHT
*LITTLE MATCH GIRL **
ALEXANDER AND THE HORRIBLE, TERRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY
JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

** MSA films* *** Animated feature* **** New HBO series*

On PBS:

October
*JAZZTIME TALE **

November
*ABEL'L ISLAND **
THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES

November (cont'd)
*NIGHTINGALE **

December
*THE TALKING EGGS **

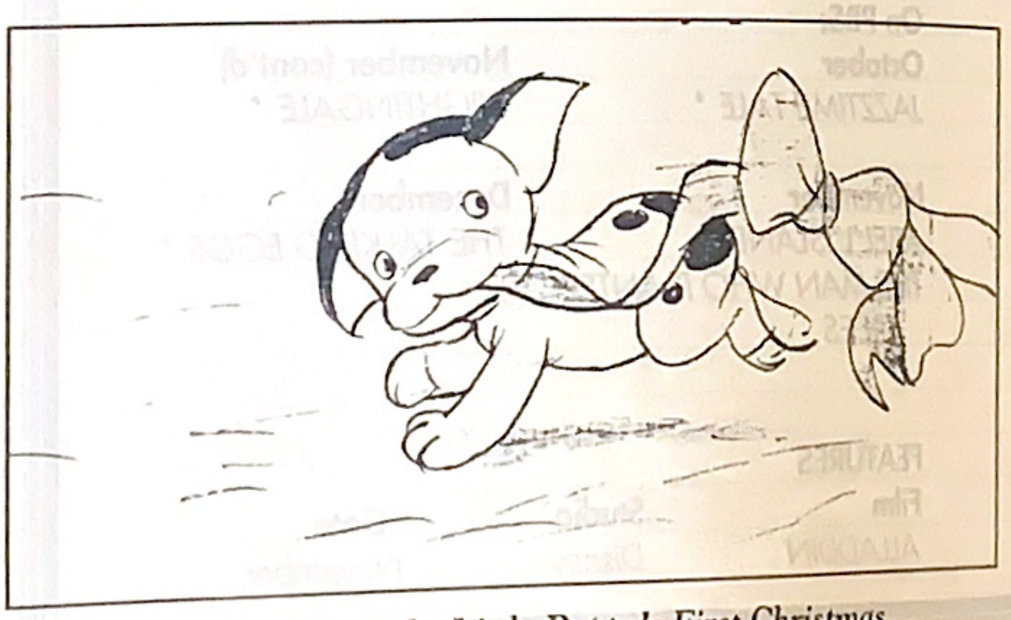
FEATURES

Film	Studio	Date
ALLADDIN	*Disney*	*November*

Well, believe it or not, 1992 will mark the 50th anniversary of one of the most beloved children's book characters of all time. Created for the original collection of 12 Little Golden books in 1942, The Poky Little Puppy was an overnight hit. Before the end of that year, the book had gone through three printings with scores of back orders. Today The Poky Little Puppy is the bestselling Little Golden Book, with 74 reprints and an estimated sale of 14 million copies.

After 50 years of worldwide popularity Poky and his family finally celebrate the holidays in the musical **THE POKY LITTLE PUPPY'S FIRST CHRISTMAS**. This half-hour special, released through Western Publishing, is scheduled to air on Showtime this December. Narration is superbly done by Donald Sutherland, among whose screen credits include the Oliver Stone film JFK. Original music is provided by Tony award winning composer William Finn (Falsettos.)

Magic and music fill the screen in our film, **THE TALKING EGGS**. It stars Danny Glover, whose impressive career includes "The Color Purple," "Lethal Weapon" and "Grand Canyon." This half-hour special airs in December on the PBS series **Long Ago And Far Away** and features an original zydeco score from composer Caleb Sampson. Maxine Fisher's version of the Creole folktale shows how the magic of a strange old woman changes a young girl's view of life forever. ■



Sample frame from ***The Poky Little Puppy's First Christmas***

Animated Programming

by Linda Simensky

Lately, there have been a number of new trends in animated programming, such as the attempt to bring animation back to prime time, the discovery of the need for a 24-hour cartoon channel, and the change in Saturday morning programming. Fox has added children's programming, NBC had dropped it, and Nickelodeon has introduced original animation during the Sunday morning period that once featured only syndicated cartoons.

With these shifts in programming, the audience for animation has been changing somewhat. And the more the audience has shifted, the more the networks have begun adjusting the programming to fit the new demographics.

The shift in viewers has been subtle, but has started nonetheless. The current audience for animation has changed slightly from the 1970's Saturday morning audience, which was made up primarily of younger children. The audience is slightly older, more diverse, and much more selective and demanding about what they'll watch.

Television programmers have discovered the potential appeal animation can have for adults (especially parents who watch with their children), for children's older siblings, and for college students. All of these viewers grew up watching animation and many still have an appreciation for the medium.

Thus, programming has slowly started changing to skew to a slightly older demographic. The animated programming of the 1960's often feature realistic human action adventure programming, such as **Johnny Quest** and **Speed Racer**. It was followed by the 1970's fare, basically teenage mystery and rock and roll, such as **Scooby-Doo** and **Josie and the Pussycats**. The 1980's brought more superhero-based action adventure, in the form of **He-Man, Captain N,** and **Jem**, and the licensing-oriented **Care Bears, Pound Puppies, Strawberry Shortcake, My Little Pony** and other forgettable half-hour commercials for toys. The more mu;mundane programming of the 1990's has tended to be based on successful movies and well-known personalities. But the more successful programs have moved away from these categories, and television animation lately has been attempting quality

Nonsense & Lullabyes

animation, direction and writing, to appeal to this wider audience.

The newer programming is starting to rely on more over-the-edge humor, writing and creativity, not only action-adventure driven stories and popular characters. In addition, there is crossover programming again — not since the **Flintstones** and **Rocky and Bullwinkle** has animated programming appealed as much to adults. The shows once again have jokes that work on multiple levels and often skew older than the 6-9 age group targeted in the past. It is common to find adults who regularly watch **The Simpsons, Ren & Stimpy, Doug, Rugrats, Beetlejuice** and even **Tiny Toons**.

At one point, the networks could guarantee a certain number of viewers between certain ages. As cable channels developed and Fox began programming Saturday mornings, there suddenly were many more viewing options. As each channel's audience eroded, there was more of an effort to attract viewership by presenting better programming.

In addition, the attitude behind the creation of the programs has been shifting. Initially, when made-for-television animation first started, companies such as Hanna Barbera, UPA and Jay Ward began simplifying production techniques to keep costs low and to stay on schedule. When the networks realized the possibilities of syndication and licensing of animated programming, and popularity of Saturday morning took off, the need for animated programming became even greater.

To keep up with the demand in the late 1960's, network television had figured out a way to make cartoons even more cheaply, by simplifying the writing and plot lines, and by trimming the production schedules once again. Companies such as Filmation, Rankin Bass, Ruby Spears and DIC were able to produce cartoons at an even faster rate, often at the expense of quality animation and storytelling. It was a 20-year experiment that didn't necessarily work.

Now with the need for better programming to appeal to a wider audience, more money and time have gone into the cartoons, and there has been a chance for the animators behind the cartoons to have more influence. They are creating cartoons they will enjoy themselves, just as the animators at Warner Brothers did in the 1940's and 1950's. Many animation fans seem to feel that this is what made cartoons work then, and it's what will make them work again.

Also, viewers are able to be a little more savvy about their viewing choices. With the plethora of home videocassettes, video games, cable programming, and remote control, no one seems to feel compelled to watch shows they don't like.

"... there has been a chance for the animators behind the cartoons to have more influence."

To satisfy these discerning viewers, the shift in programming has started. It seems that these changes were made possible by the fact that the newest network, Fox, and cable channels, such as Nickelodeon, finally could afford to produce original programming and have attempted to go for the cutting edge. And shows such as "The Ren & Stimpy Show" and "The Simpsons" are the results of this innovation. It is hard to determine if these shows represent a trend, and if they will have any effect on future programming.

We are approaching a crossroad, which could possibly determine the fate of animated television programming for the next few years. Cable could remain alternative and innovative, or, buoyed by the success of current programs and licensing possibilities, go mainstream. The networks could attempt exact ripoffs of the Simpsons and Ren & Stimpy, or possibly create new and innovative programming. Nevertheless, if network programmers are paying attention to the shift in the audience, it is likely that we will continue to see more changes in animation programming in the future. ■

KATZ INTERVIEW, *continued from page 9*

Q: Does this mean you've added new segments of animation?

A: We'll be running the cartoons from whatever years they are, but Droopy will be hosting the show 20 seconds at the open, 20 seconds at the close and the bumpers in between cartoons in which you'll see Droopy in a new environment. I can't say how we're doing this, that would be giving away a secret; but the Droopy we know and love will remain Droopy. We will not change his character. We will just place him in a different environment.

"We have a love for the cartoon."

Q: There a certain number of classic cartoons at your disposal; how will you keep from becoming repetitive?

A: The library is massive. It really is. There are 8,500 different titles. You have to be glued to your set for months on end before you say a repeat. And I think we have the largest cartoon library in the world. It will be very easy for us to keep from being repetitive. I think the biggest challenge for us is really the other. How do we insure that we are getting all the programming in. Believe me, with that number of titles sitting around you really have to make an effort to see what's out there. That's why we sent our programming guys up to New York. To look through (literally) musty old boxes of reels that hadn't been opened in thirty years to see what was in there. We found some original show openings with Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear together. Some great stuff that hasn't been seen in years.

Q: Would you say you are holding on to the animated equivalent of the "lost" episodes of **THE HONEYMOONERS**?

A: Exactly, plus, you're 26 and I'm 30 and I probably remember Huckleberry Hound a little better than you do. But I had never seen Yogi and Huckleberry Hound together. To me they were totally separate cartoons. I found out recently that Yogi started out as one of the elements on Huck's show. Now that we've found these things we can restore them to what they originally were.

We've got a show devoted to recapping the given year called **BOOMERANG.** Sunday mornings we're gonna say hey, come

back with us to a given year. I can go back to a year like 1972 and these are the shows that were produced in 1972. For instance, Hanna Barbera took a lot of it's old programming and repackaged it and stripped off the original opens and closes. So what we're doing is we're going back into the archives and saying okay, what did it look like in 1972? Which openings did they use? Which cartoons did they produce specifically for the 1972 season? And let's bring it back to exactly the way it used to be.

Q: How do you feel the more obscure cartoons will fare next to the classics the network will be airing?

A: There are some great unknown gems. I remember growing up with **Hong Kong Phooey** for example. This new generation of kids knows nothing about it. Once they see it they're not going to differentiate whether it was created in 1976, 1986 or 1993. It's quality animation.

Q: The new trend in original programming seems to be animation that will appeal to an older audience as with the **Simpsons** and **Ren & Stimpy**. When the Cartoon Network begins running original programming, will you be following the same trend?

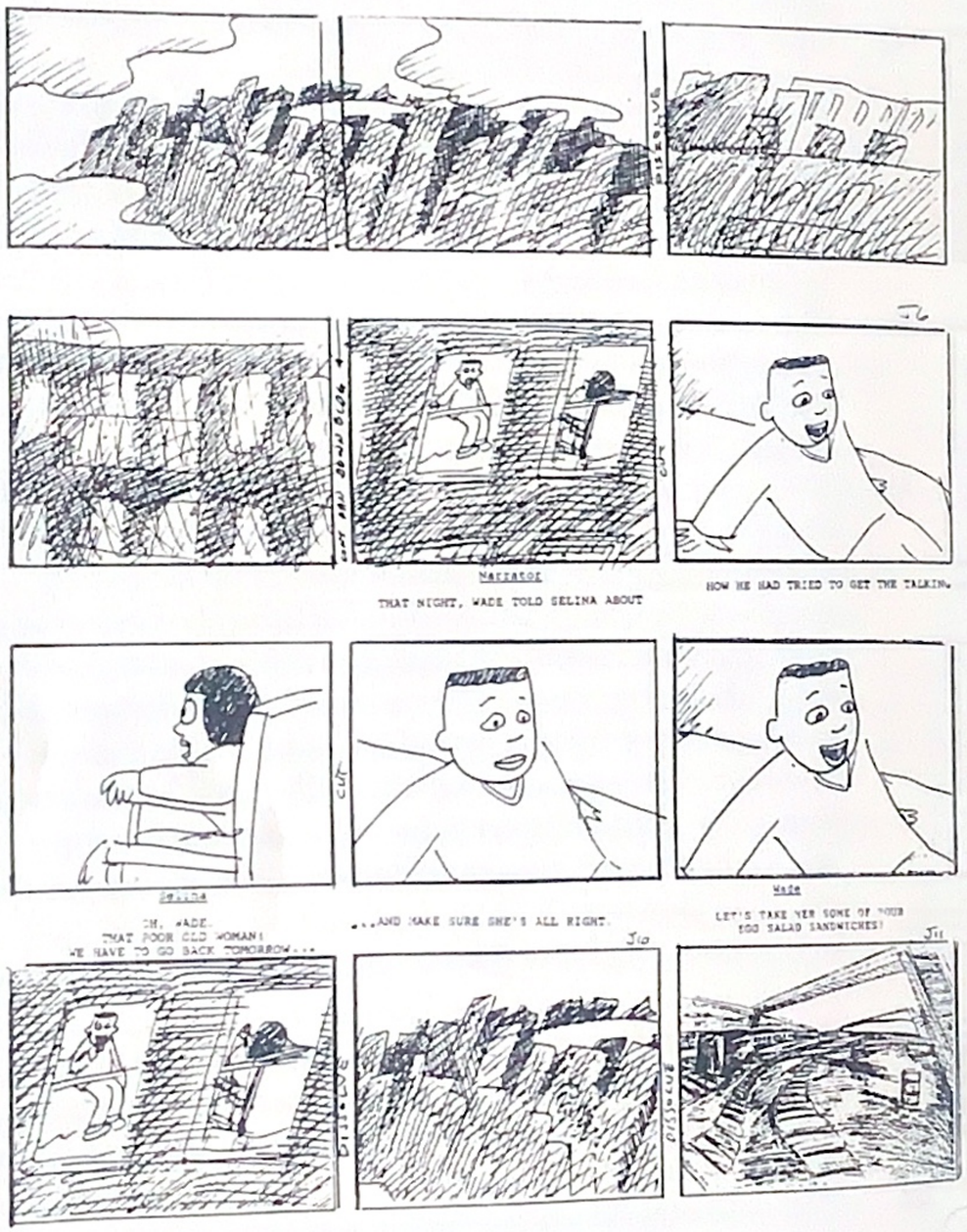
A: Well, you know we won't be airing original programming for a while. Hopefully this will be a creative process, not a marketing process. We hope to air the best animated series available regardless of it's target. Obviously advertising demands that you place it in the environment where you get the broadest audience. I doubt if you're going to see something targeted to the 5 to 10 audience as our first new series. But if it's the most brilliant piece of animation we see, hopefully it will be the first one we run. We have the luxury of having primetime. So that would indicate to me that most likely it will be something that appeals to the whole family.

Q: Is there the possibility of developing animated features for television?

A: We would love to, but that is a very ambitious process. It is hard to keep the animated concepts going for two hours. But if that's the best new animation that's out there, that's what we will run.

Q: What advice would you give animators interested in proposing ideas for new programming.

A: They should be looking at programming that is exciting, unusual, cutting edge, but yet designed for the whole family. I don't have to see sexist remarks, naked bodies or excessive violence to see creativity. And I think that you can do exciting, innovative, cutting edge programs and still appeal to the whole family. That is what I would like to see from animators. ■


WARRIOR
THAT NIGHT, WADE TOLD SELINA ABOUT
HOW HE HAD TRIED TO GET THE TALKIN.
SELINA
OH, WADE.
THAT POOR OLD WOMAN!
WE HAVE TO GO BACK TOMORROW...
...AND MAKE SURE SHE'S ALL RIGHT.
WADE
LET'S TAKE HER SOME OF YOUR
EGG SALAD SANDWICHES!

Storyboard: Talking Eggs

Gallery Lainzberg has taken charge of selling Sporn animation cels and background scenes. In the past we offered these at $33 apiece but can no longer do so. Catalogues, exhibits, and presentations of most of our work will be handled through Gallery Lainzberg. We suggest you contact them if you have any interest in our artwork.

Gallery Lainzberg
200 Guarantee Bldg.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa
52401

(708) 357–3577

EDITORIAL, continued from inside front cover

three weeks to restructure their company to satisfy the Irish courts, or they'll have to completely liquidate. **A Troll In Central Park** needs an additional $150,000 to complete, and **Thumbelina** needs an additional $4 million. Both are scheduled to be released next summer by MGM (and they don't seem to be advancing any money just yet.)

Animation producer, Fred Calvert, has been brought in to finish Richard Williams' film, **The Cobbler & The Thief**. After working on the film for over 20 years, Williams saw Warner Bros. call on the insurance bond company to pull his dreamfilm away from him. Calvert hired two scriptwriters and reworked 18 minutes of film to "fix" it. It's expected to be completed January 1. (Not in time to compete with Disney's **ALADDIN**.) No distributor is set since Warners gave it up.

In a similar note, John Kricfalusi has been replaced as the "auteur" of **REN & STIMPY** when Nickelodeon hired Bob Camp to replace him. Kricfalusi has been retained as a "consultant." Talk about "Space Madness!"

All this has happened in just under three months! One wonders what the next three will bring; perhaps one or two good stories. ■

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